

*The opinions expressed here are not necessarily the opinions of the National Medical Association.*

## The Story of How Minority Physicians Make It (or Don't Make It) Needs to be Told

Dear NMA:

It is good to finally see greater attention being paid to racism in the medical profession. Over the past several decades, so many studies have been done about this subject, but the "real" story is yet to be told. For all those years of affirmative action where African Americans were vigorously recruited to medical schools, why is it that more advances haven't been made by African Americans in medical practices?

One answer to this is that the "attacks" against African-American physicians have been steadily increasing for a long time now. In the past 24 years, I have worked as a "black female" physician. All too often, I was seen as someone who needed to be "placed" where I could be seen and not heard. Over those 24 years, I have seen racial matters in medicine go from bad to worse. It is no surprise to me that there are great discrepancies between the medical care given to minorities and that of white America. The physicians who have a "social stake" in minority patients have been systematically undermined, then rebuked as unworthy of the title "doctor."

In the recent past, American medical schools were graduating minority physicians in record numbers, but where are they now? I have seen many studies about African-American enrollment in medical schools and their subsequent success in training programs, but where are the stud-



ies that look at how African-American physicians fare after their training is over?

The story of how minority physicians make it (or don't make it) in medicine needs to be told. From my experience, I can give many accounts of how racism morbidly changed or destroyed a black physician's ability to practice his or her profession. Here is an example I would like to share, most of it is taken from a letter I wrote some 15 years ago:

*I had just finished my training in internal medicine in 1982 and was bound for Palatka, FL to repay an obligation to the National Health Service Corp (NHSC)... While I could speak to the problems I've faced, instead I will talk about Dr. Linda Johnson—another African-American physician who had recently completed her residency in family medicine.*

*The situation was that she and her husband (also a physician) owed the NHSC several years of "payback." They were very diligent in their desire to serve in a Health Manpower Shortage Areas... Unfortunately in the 80s... the programs and federal clinics that helped physicians serve in [those areas] were being shut down. [Without hesitation] the Johnsons' stuck to their promise to serve the underserved*

*patients of Florida. After the last federal clinic she had worked at was closed, Dr. Johnson and her husband took it upon themselves to gather funds and set up their practices in the same HMSA where I had been assigned, namely Palatka, FL.*

*Dr. Johnson had just gotten her admitting privileges at Putnam Community Hospital (PCH) and had worked there for two or three months when the first attempt to undermine her practice occurred.*

*I recall Dr. Johnson bitterly complaining about how she was being unfairly treated by the emergency department's director at PCH. Apparently, her patients with health insurance were being "given away" or admitted to other physicians when they came to the ER in need of admission. Even when her patients asked to be admitted to her service, their wishes were only granted if they didn't have any insurance. The pattern of all of her "paying customers" being admitted to [other physicians]—all white male physicians—was blatant. Furthermore, Dr. Johnson complained that she was being called to admit indigent patients that came through the ER even though she wasn't on call to take admissions!*

*Her patients complained that she did not see them when they were admitted to PCH. The problem, of course, was that she was not informed when her clinic patients were being admitted to the hospital! After this happened several times, and she was not able to resolve this problem by going through the hospital's grievance procedures, Dr. Johnson felt she had no choice but to take the ER director and PCH to court.*

*I never heard the end of this story from Dr. Johnson. For years, I have always wanted to know the outcome of her lawsuit. Where is*

Dr. Linda Johnson now?

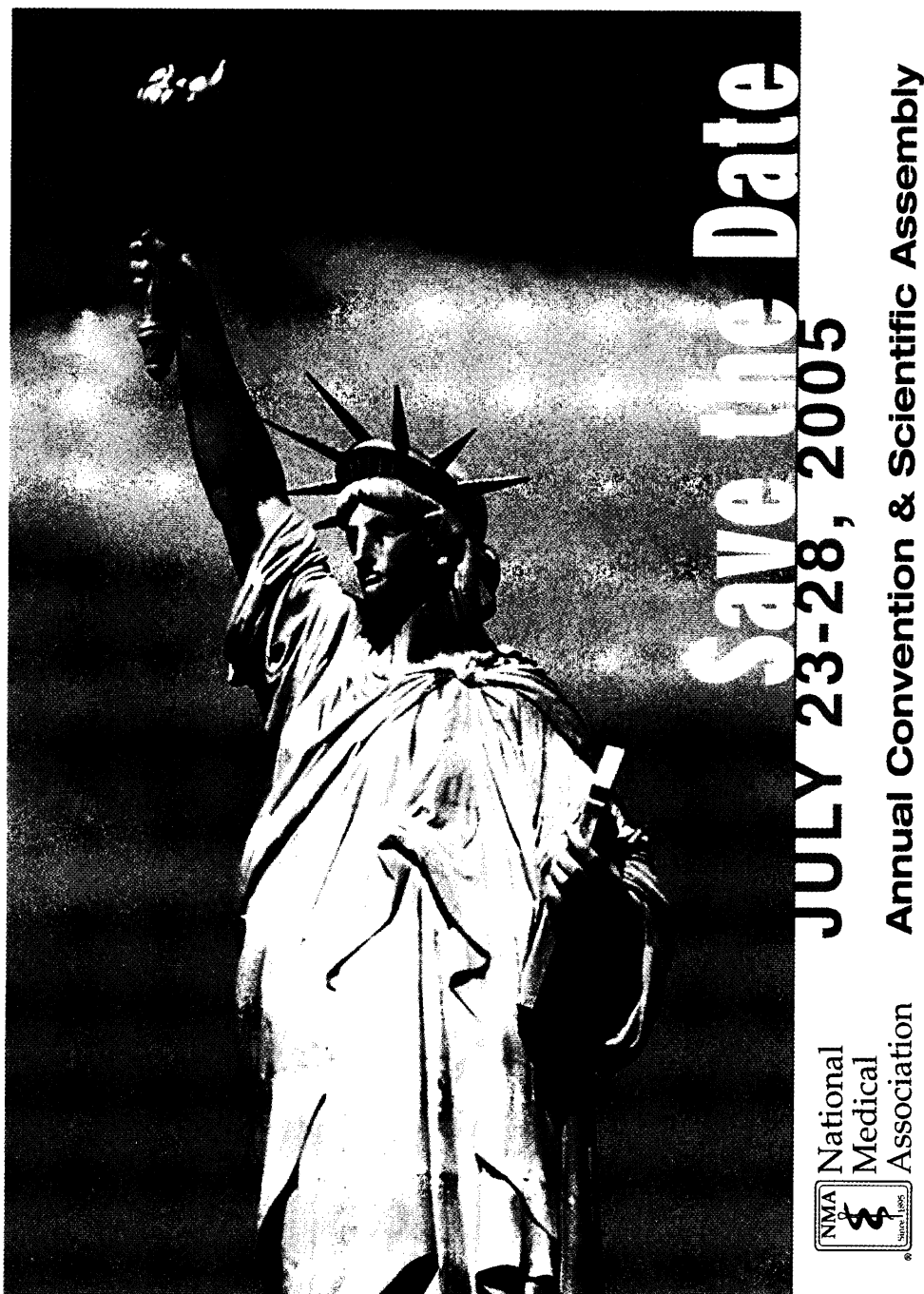
I am sure that Dr. Johnson's story isn't unique. There are other important accounts of what minority physicians have to endure to stay in practice. It is time for these stories to be told. It is time we demonstrate how racism has kept so many good physicians from being successful in their medical practices!

Where do we start? *Exposing* how racism is prevalent in medi-

cine will be difficult. Racist attacks are largely ignored or not even acknowledged for what they are! *Recognizing* racism in all of its permutations is paramount. Devising a way to recognize and expose racism is what I hope to accomplish through recanting the history of physicians like the Johnsons. Once we realize how racism rears its ugly head, methods of confronting it and resolving its ill effects can be done.

It is my most sincere hope that NMA's Council on Clinical Practice (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2004;96:1672-1673) can help make a difference. I have no delusions that reducing the attacks on African-American physicians will be easy. None the less, let's get started!

Cheryl L Dickason, MD, FAAEM  
P.O. Box 1149  
Ashton, MD 20861-1149  
ResqcheryL09@msn.com



**Save the Date**

**JULY 23-28, 2005**

**Annual Convention & Scientific Assembly**

National Medical Association

NMA